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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PARIS 000216

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SUBJECT: LATEST ELYSEE TAKE ON LEBANON

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Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt, for reasons 1.4. (b), (d).

¶1. (C) French Presidency adviser on NEA affairs Boris Boillon told us February 1 that France has run out of "levers, carrots, and sticks" to use in resolving the continued political impasse in Lebanon. The word from the French embassy in Damascus, he added, was that Syrian President Assad has said that, if forced to choose between hosting the Arab League summit or staying the course in Lebanon, he will choose staying the course in Lebanon. France's ambassador to Syria reports that, with only weeks before the projected summit, Syria has done nothing to prepare for it.

¶2. (C) To emphasize France's dilemma given the current situation, Boillon ran through four "weapons" that presumably could be used against Syria to force it to accept Michel Sleiman's election as president:

--Not holding the Arab summit in Damascus: As noted above, this has proven to be a "false weapon."

--Moving ahead with the Special Tribunal: This is a long shot, since the Tribunal still lacks about USD 15 million to start operations. He pointed to the lack of contributions by other EU, Gulf state, or Maghreb governments. He called the Saudis' failure to contribute "shameful" and strange. When French President Sarkozy raised the issue with King Abdallah recently, Abdallah replied only that he would refer the issue to God.

--Threat of Israeli military action: A dangerous option that would be "out of our control." Boillon said that it was also unlikely in the absence of an immediate crisis or provocation.

--Tightening sanctions: The problem with this option is determining the basis for their imposition. Syrian FM Mu'allim has regularly challenged his interlocutors to provide the proof of Syrian responsibility for violence or the lack of progress in Lebanon. Boillon contended that Europeans would not unify behind sanctions. He blamed a growing tendency among Europeans to engage in legalistic argumentation rather than asserting state power. Referring to recent events, Boillon asked why France should ban Mu'allim from visiting if Germany will welcome him. He compared Syria to a slippery bar of soap on which no one can get a firm grip. Moreover, in his glum summation, the Saudis

and Egyptians will do nothing. Why should France be "more Arab than the Arabs" vis-a-vis Syria?

13. (C) Boillon opined that the Syrians have "won" with the agreement on Sleiman and have pocketed his candidacy to get more concessions. We asked about the recent rumors that France had toyed with a Faris Boueiz candidacy. Boillon responded: "Let's be clear. Qatari PM/FM Hamid bin Jasim came to Paris presenting ideas that included a Boueiz candidacy, since Sleiman was going nowhere. We responded clearly that the current Arab league initiative was the only clear line forward and there was no question of France changing from its support for Sleiman." He claimed that the Elysee told HBJ that this latest ploy would only drag things out and allow the situation to worsen. This was not time to change course again; the Arab League initiative, accepted by all Arabs, was the only viable one in play. Boillon noted that Boueiz was in Paris during HBJ's visit fanning rumors that he was about to be anointed as the alternative to Sleiman.

4, (C) Voicing his personal opinion, Boillon said he thinks the Syrians want to drag things out until a new U.S. administration takes office. Nevertheless, the Syrians continue to say that they support Sleiman and have no problems with him; it is just a question of the proper formation of the government. Boillon asserted that the Syrians have proven they will not live up to their word and will continue to change conditions for any settlement. It now appears that agreeing to Sleiman was a pretext to play for time. In addition, he continued, Michel Aoun is blocking progress in furtherance of his own ambitions. The blame was not entirely on the March 8/Syrian side, according to Boillon. Too many others in Lebanon, including within March 14, have no interest in pushing the status quo forward. The West seemed alone in agonizing about the future of Lebanon.

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15. (C) Boillon concluded his discussion of Lebanon by saying that France is being prudent and has no initiative in play or planned (given the failure of its most recent efforts) but remains engaged. The immediate risk is that the continued impasse and steady deterioration of the security situation will continue to undermine Sleiman's candidacy. For now, however, France supports the Arab League initiative, has cut off all senior-level contact with Syria, has rejected the Qatari initiative, and has no plans to try anything new.

16. (C) Comment: The impression that the French are out of ideas and waiting anxiously to see what happens has come across in our most recent discussions during visits by Staffdel Diamond and OVP Deputy Assistant for National Security Joseph Wood. Boillon and others have referred to "Lebanon fatigue" at the UN, and it seems to have permeated the GOF here. FM Kouchner has several times publicly expressed strong French support for the Arab League initiative, although taking pains to describe it as an outgrowth of initiatives he had already launched. This, for now, seems as far as the French are prepared to go after the failure of their diplomatic efforts with Syria.

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